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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001705

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/REA, INR/NESA  
TEL AVIV FOR RLEBARON  
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/24/2014

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SUBJECT: (U) ELECTORAL REFORM: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

Classified By: CDA FRANK URBANCIC; REASON 1.4 (B, D).

11. (C) Summary: Reducing the number of electoral constituencies is one of the leading political issues in Kuwait. The concept is that larger constituencies will make vote-buying harder and dilute the influence of tribes. PM Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad has announced that the GOK will settle this matter before the summer parliamentary recess (i.e. by early July), but many scenarios are circulating, making it difficult to achieve consensus around a specific plan in so short a time. The specifics matter: depending on the voting mechanism adopted, the result could be more or less democratic than the current electoral process. End Summary.

(U) Parochialism

12. (SBU) Although all Members of Parliament (MPs) are supposed to represent the entire country in the National Assembly, in reality they are often narrowly focused on the issues of their districts and their own ideological agendas. Their parochialism is not surprising, given that it is possible to be elected with fewer than one thousand votes.

13. (U) The Constitution sets the number of elected MPs at 50, but does not specify the number of constituencies. Until 1980, Kuwait was divided into ten districts, each electing five members. Many commentators believe that the increase to 25 districts in 1980 only served to promote narrow tribalism, as the smaller districts allowed candidates to win election with fewer votes from a higher concentration of relatives and fellow-tribesmen.

(U) Redrawing The Map

14. (SBU) The redrawing of the electoral map is at the top of the agenda in the National Assembly. 31 MPs have reportedly agreed on the principle of reducing (and thereby enlarging) the number of electoral constituencies. (NOTE: The top two vote-getters in each constituency are elected to office, for a total of 50 elected MPs. In addition, Cabinet Ministers are ex-officio MPs. The total number of MPs is currently 65, so 33 is an absolute majority in the National Assembly. END NOTE.) The concept of the proposed change is to make electoral corruption more difficult and dilute tribal influence, by increasing the size of constituencies. The GOK was widely perceived as throwing money around to influence the July 2003 elections. Many current MPs were voted into office with barely 1,000 votes, and well over half were elected with fewer than 2,000; the voting system is single-round, first-two-past-the-post. Constituencies average 3,000-6,000 eligible voters (Kuwait has a total of approximately 137,000 eligible voters: male citizens over 21 who have been citizens for over 20 years; members of the armed forces and security forces are not allowed to vote). Various proposals are circulating; most would see the number of constituencies reduced to ten or five. The devil is in the details: according to some proposals, each voter would cast ballots for two candidates in a district where the top five candidates would be elected; the result would be no/no significant increase in votes needed for election (see para. 10), but it is not clear that MPs grasp this point.

15. (SBU) The National Assembly, MPs tell us, may hold a special session on electoral reform on June 5. Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah assured the National Assembly that the GOK was very serious about addressing this issue before the Assembly recesses for the summer, probably early in July. A May 24 local English-language daily, however, cited a Government source as expecting the issue of political redistricting to be carried over into the 2004-05 session of Parliament.

(U) Reduction Advocates and Opponents

16. (C) A majority of MPs--14 Islamists, 6 members of the Popular Action Bloc, 5 Independent Liberals, and approximately 6 pro-Government and Government-leaning members--support a reduction in the number of constituencies. There is no

consensus among them on the exact makeup of a new system, but most appear willing to support a reduction to 10 districts.

17. (SBU) Most of the MPs opposing a reduction are from the pro-Government bloc or are pro-Government-leaning Independents, but they also include 4 Islamists. After numerous meetings with over half of the MPs, we estimate 18 MPs oppose a reduction; a few actually want to increase the number to 30 districts, but that notion is unlikely to gain traction. Arguments in support of the status quo include:

- constituencies should be kept small to allow an MP to "make a difference" in his district;

- political campaigns, which now are funded completely by the candidates, would become too expensive if there were fewer/larger districts, forcing candidates to find funding from unpalatable groups, illegal sources, or even foreign countries;

- fewer/larger districts would lead to an outcry for legalizing political parties. Some fear that might lead to a "Lebanonization" of Kuwaiti politics, in which intelligence agencies, the police, and violence would have great influence on elections, and tribes would resort to criminal tactics to retain parliamentary seats.

(U) The GOK Position

18. (C) The GOK was reluctant to weigh in seriously on the issue until a few months ago. It has now offered two proposals, both recommending 10 districts. These and 11 other proposals are now before the National Assembly's five-member Interior and Defense Affairs Committee. The Committee, chaired by MP Mohammed Al-Fajji, will present its recommendations on or before June 2. Al-Fajji told PolOff that the GOK proposals have some supporters in Parliament, but that most MPs favor various other plans. (NOTE: No matter what recommendation emerges from the Committee, the National Assembly could choose, by majority vote, to review any proposal--and if it had that many votes, it could pass the proposal. END NOTE.)

19. (C) Al-Fajji assured PolOff the plan that goes to the full National Assembly for a vote will call for 10 electoral constituencies. There are many different ten-constituency proposals on the table, differing in the geographic distribution of districts, the number of seats in each district (they would have to average five per district, but some districts could be larger than others), and how many votes each voter would be permitted to cast: some proposals would give each voter only two votes. (NOTE: now, each voter can cast two votes, and the top two finishers in the district are elected; it is permissible to cast only one vote--a practice referred to as "one-eyed" voting; it is not/not permitted to cast both votes for one candidate. END NOTE.)

(SBU) One Seat, One Vote -- Or It Doesn't Compute

10. (C) There is a crucial relationship between the number of votes each voter is allowed to cast and the number of seats in the district. Now, each voter has a say in 100% of his district's parliamentary representation (two votes, two seats). Under a two votes/five seats scenario, each voter would have a say in only 40% of his district's parliamentary representation. The result, as can be shown by simple arithmetic, would be that no/no increase in votes would be needed for election (the top finisher would doubtless win more votes than now, but the candidates finishing third through fifth would be elected, whereas in the current system they are losers).

11. (C) A five votes/five seats scenario (i.e. "one seat, one vote") would accomplish the stated purpose of reform, i.e. raise significantly the number of votes required for election. This would truly diminish the effects of tribal politics and make electoral corruption more costly. By making it more difficult for tribal connections to determine the outcome of elections, such a system could heighten the importance of substantive political agendas instead of tribal affiliation; this could indeed foster demands for the legalization of political parties--which most political spheres other than the GOK already support.

12. (C) COMMENT: Unless/until MPs achieve consensus in support of one specific scenario, the GOK will face little pressure to come to closure on electoral reform.  
URBANCIC